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A DANGEROUS IDEAL

BY

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A DANGEROUS IDEAL.

It seems almost incredible that at the middle of this Nineteenth Century there was no law in America which made the cruel treatment of animals, in itself, a punishable offence. Those of us old enough to remember village life, say forty years ago, will recall many an act of inhumanity which then passed for "sport," but which to-day is a crime. I remember certain companions of my own boyhood for example, all of them regular attendants at the same village Sunday School, telling me of "experiments" they had made in torturing kittens and rabbits, simply to watch their convulsions in the agony of death. If a man saw fit to pour alcohol over his dog and set him afire, there was, indeed, protest against his brutality, but otherwise he was safe. The law of the land set no limits to his treatment of his own property. If he chose to burn it alive when its services were no longer of value,—who had the right to object?

Have we changed all this? Certainly, to some extent. Cruelty, the needless infliction of pain, the torture for amusement, is at last recognized, not only as an offense against good manners, but as an injury to the commonwealth. Humane Societies and Bands of Mercy now inculcate lessons of kindness at the earliest age. Children are to-day taught that cruelty is wicked; that there is something of sacredness in every life, and that mercy is due even to the worm that crawls at our feet.

But is there to be seen any tendency backward at the present time? The infliction of slow torture upon helpless animals,—is this again coming into general practice and to be defended by argument? Is it even about to be taught to young men and young women as a necessity

of education? This seems to me one of the serious questions of the hour. Within the past thirty years a new ideal has become prominent; the longing to penetrate to the inmost heart of things, to solve every enigma of Nature, and to unravel each mystery of human existence. Whence comes the origin of life? Whither are we going? What is the cause of all these curious phenomena which we sum up in the word Vitality? These are questions modern science proposes, and desires either to answer or prove unanswerable. Man once sought to know his duty to his God and his fellow-men; the advanced scientific spirit of to-day sometimes asks us if, after all, we are quite certain we have any duties, or if we are sure that God exists?

What is the ideal of this phase of thought? It seems to me, this : *that in future, the chief aim of human endeavor should be to wrest from Nature her secrets.*

But supposing certain facts are so intimately wrapped up with life and sensation that we can get at them only by the infliction of acute agony, of prolonged pain? What if one who seeks to penetrate to the innermost sanctuary of life must unlearn every lesson of pity, must teach himself to take pleasure in the agony he inflicts, must become almost a human fiend? No matter. What is the sentiment of compassion that for a moment it should stand in the way of scientific investigation? A true physiologist, says Dr. Claude Bernard, "does not hear the animal's cries of pain. He is blind to the blood that flows. *He sees nothing but his idea*, and organisms which conceal from him *the secret he is resolved to discover.*" The question of benefit to one's fellow-creatures need not for a moment enter his thoughts. "I do not believe," says Dr. Charles Richet, Professor of Physiology in Paris, "that a single experimenter says to himself, when he gives curare* to a rabbit

*Curare is a drug used to keep the animal motionless; sensation is supposed to be unimpaired.

or cuts the spinal cord of a dog. 'Here is an experiment which will relieve or cure disease.' No ; he does not think of that. He says to himself, "I shall clear up an obscure point ; I will seek out *a new fact*. And this scientific curiosity which alone animates him is explained by the idea he has of science. This is why we pass our days surrounded by groaning creatures, in the midst of blood and suffering, and bending over palpitating entrails."*

How far has this spirit of inquiry, no matter at what cost, penetrated American institutions of learning ? Does it govern the teaching of our schools of medicine ? In schools, academies and colleges, shall young men and young women, boys and girls, be taught that the new scientific Ideal of investigation for its own sake, *demand*s a *personal confirmation of every physiological statement* ? Are text-books to give way before the young student with his cords and knife ? That is a present tendency, it must be confessed.

In the POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY, Dr. Wesley Mills, Professor of Physiology in McGill University, has argued strongly in favor of teaching science by means of experiment. "Introduce scientific methods and introduce science itself according to the laws that underlie our organization, and you will revolutionize our schools," he tells the teachers to whom he was speaking. "Physiology is perhaps the most difficult of all sciences to teach well in schools. Book physiology is rubbish, utter rubbish," he exclaims with warmth. "*There is no science that does not permit of simple experiments* that may be introduced into any school. *The pupils will delight in these*, and they will prove a source of strength, pleasure and inspiration. I am not to be understood as claiming that every fact that a child shall take cognizance of shall be gained through observation and experiment ; *but this is the ideal, and the*

*"Revue des Deux Mondes," Feb. 15th, 1883.

nearer it is approached the better." * * * "From first to last the student should be an investigator. This implies a great deal." It does indeed. Not long since I was given the name of a young girl whose scientific enthusiasm had been so keenly stirred that she gave up her pet kitten to the teacher of physiology that it might be vivisected before her class!

What is to be the outcome of this new and dangerous ideal? I do not see how it can result in anything else than *education in the art of scientific cruelty*. By instinct nearly every lad born into the world is a savage; it is by training and education that he learns compassion and feels pity. Now suppose the young student is taught that to inflict pain—"to seek out a new fact," as Richet phrases it—is not merely excusable, but deserving of praise? Torture then finds an apology; the inarticulate agony of his pet dog or rabbit will no longer shock. Like De Cyon of St. Petersburg, he will approach his vivisections with a "joyful excitement," perhaps all the more pleasureable because aroused by the agony he inflicts. Like Mantegazza of Milan, he may crucify pregnant rabbits with "atrocious torture" (*dolores atrocissimi*), conducting his experiments as the Italian physiologist conducted his, "with much pleasure and patience." Like Klein of London, he will learn to have "no regard at all" for the suffering he inflicts because, in the progress of his investigations in torture, he "has no time, so to speak, for thinking what the animal may feel or suffer."

Now, speaking as a physician, I cannot but regard this development of the new scientific spirit in our public schools and academies, with grave doubt and keen apprehension. There are peculiar dangers which invariably accompany investigations like these. For nothing is more certain than that there may arise in some organizations a strange satisfaction or sensation of content at the sight of agony or bloodshed, and in these cases a

great danger, which cannot be fully explained, is close at hand. "I would shrink with horror," said Dr. Haughton, "from accustoming classes of young men to the sight of animals under vivisection. * * Science would gain nothing, and the world would have *let loose upon it a set of young devils.*" "Watch the students at a vivisection," suggested the late Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School. "It is the blood and suffering — not the science — that rivets their breathless attention." Is it not a significant fact—which the last census of the United States reveals—that of the whole number of murderers confined in jails and prisons, one occupation contributed so many—the one which pertains to blood-letting and butchery? The State of Massachusetts once produced a boy murderer who took diabolic delight in cutting and stabbing children to death. In August, 1891, John Conway was hung at Liverpool for the inexplicable murder of a little boy. Immediately after the drop fell his confession was read: "I was impelled to that crime by a murderous mania—a *morbid curiosity to observe the process of dying!*"

A Canadian physician was executed in London in 1892 for murder. A number of young women, against whom he had no cause for malice, he had undoubtedly put to death by one of the most agonizing of poisons, and under guise of conferring a benefit, merely that in the contemplation of their suffering he might find pleasure and excitement. Cicero tells us that in his time, men took their sons to gladiatorial combats in order that youth might learn how to die bravely when the summons came. Ah, if that had been the only lesson taught! A century of such lessons passes, and then this sight of fierce combat and bloody struggle has stirred into life among the Roman populace a taste for human agony that the mere death of gladiators could not satisfy; and then came the infamous exhibitions related by Tacitus and Suetonius—the feasting of lions upon

Christian martyrs, and living human torches, smeared with pitch, burning at night in the gardens of Nero. Over how much of her history Humanity is obliged to draw the veil! Dr. Rolleston, Professor of Anatomy at Oxford University, but hinted at the truth when he told the Royal Commission that "*the sight of a living, bleeding and quivering organism most undoubtedly acts in a particular way on the nature within us*"—"that lower nature which we possess, in common with the Carnivora!"

I have written this as a warning of which there seems to me a growing need. To the practice of vivisection in medical schools I do not now refer; that is a question by itself. But let me advise parents and teachers to be infinitely cautious before—even in the name of science—they incur the needless risk of awakening the demon of cruelty in the hearts of the young. No experimentation upon living animals which involves the causation of pain, or the flow of blood, should ever be shown to classes of students in schools. There are no compensating advantages to the positive dangers which the practice involves. There are no scientific truths necessary to be known, which may not be fixed upon the memory of any pupil without this risk.

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